

# Did the Chinese discover America before Columbus?

contributed by Vivek Bammi

In a book published in 2002, called *1421: The Year China Discovered America* (William Morrow, New York), a retired submarine commander in Britain's Royal Navy, Gavin Menzies, claims that the Chinese discovered America about 70 years before Columbus. Under Emperor Zhu Di, China in the early 15th century was a great seafaring nation. Huge Chinese ships, commanded by Admiral Zheng He, and bearing silk, porcelain, and other treasures made expeditions to Indonesia, India, and as far as East Africa. Menzies says he has found proof that the Chinese ships sailed further—around the Cape of Good Hope in Southern Africa and all the way to the Americas, with some ships even crossing the Pacific back to China. He insists not only that the Chinese beat Columbus, but that European explorers who reached the Americas did so with maps copied from the Chinese. The book has created controversy, and many scholars have questioned the claims of Menzies.

In this activity, we will look at evidence for and against Menzies' thesis, and then you can reach your own conclusion on the question: did the Chinese discover America before Columbus?

## ***Evidence for the claim***

- 1 In 1421, China was more powerful than any other nation. The Ming Emperor Zhu Di had a vision of discovering and charting the entire world and bringing it into Confucian and Buddhist harmony through trade and diplomacy. Serving him was one of the greatest admirals the world has ever known, Zheng He, a Muslim eunuch and one of the king's closest advisors.
- 2 The whole world was accurately mapped by 1423—before European voyages of discovery started. A map said to date from 1418 was recently displayed in Beijing by a Chinese lawyer. The map shows both North and South America in unusual detail. The lawyer claims that the map proves the Chinese explorer Zheng He had been to America many years before Columbus, and also shows the Chinese understanding of the entire world. Moreover, there was only one nation at that time with the wealth, the scientific knowledge, the ships, and the seafaring experience to have carried out voyages around the world, and that was China.
- 3 Zheng He's fleet for the expedition to the western lands from 1421 to 1423 consisted of more than 300 ships manned by over 28,000 people. Each of the 62 flag ships of the fleet was roughly 450 feet long and 190 feet wide. By comparison, Columbus' flagship, the Santa Maria, was 75 feet by 25 feet.
- 4 In the official history of the Ming Dynasty it is recorded that Zheng He led excursions to Java, Sumatra, Vietnam, Siam, Cambodia, Philippines, Ceylon, India, Yemen, Arabia, and Somalia. As a clear demonstration of his travel to Africa, he brought giraffes and lions back to China as souvenirs. The official history also mentioned "Franca" (the term to describe today's France and Portugal) and Holland. The Hollanders were described as tall people with red hair and beards, long noses, and deep eye sockets. If he did meet with Europeans in their native countries, the only way would be to navigate around the Cape of Good Hope (the Suez Canal was only built in 1869).
- 5 Local people in the Pacific and the Americas have left descriptions of Chinese or Asiatic peoples who settled amongst them before Europeans arrived. In Northern Australia there are references to "honey-coloured people" settling, the Maoris of New Zealand refer to "light-coloured settlers", and in Greenland it's recorded that "people from Cathay have visited here". Carvings in the New England and Mississippi areas of North America show foreign ships and horses, an



animal that became extinct in the Americas in about 10,000 BCE. Studies using DNA suggest connections between the Chinese and American Indian groups in South America.

- 6 Plants indigenous (original) to one continent were found on another by European explorers.
  - From China to Australia: lotuses and papyrus; to North America: rice, poppy seeds, roses; to Amazon and Mexico: rice.
  - From South America to China and Southeast Asia: maize (corn); to Pacific islands: yams, sweet potatoes; to Philippines: potatoes and maize.
- 7 The Newport tower in Newport, Rhode Island (USA) was, according to Menzies, actually built by the Chinese as it resembled a lighthouse built in China in the 13th century.

#### Evidence against the claim

- 1 There was strong opposition to the ocean voyages in China, especially from the Mandarins (ruling officials), who felt that the voyages resulted in wasteful expenditure and affected the country's finances. They believed that the emperor should focus on dealing with the poverty of the millions of Chinese farmers and to build up China's internal strength. They also feared merchants and foreigners as threats to their privileged place in Chinese society. Emperor Zhu Di's son and successor, Zhu Gaozhi, agreed with them, and in 1424 he ordered a halt to all ocean voyages, the destruction of the large Chinese fleet, and the burning of the records of Zheng He's expeditions. As a result, we have no direct evidence to support Menzies' claim that the Chinese discovered America in 1421.
- 2 Unlike the European explorers, armies and governments from the 15th to 19th centuries, who sought economic and political control of new territories, the Chinese had no interest in direct colonization of the areas that their fleets visited. Rather, the Chinese voyages aimed at gaining scientific knowledge and displaying the wealth and power of their civilization and the emperor, the "Son of Heaven". Most of the products brought back to China from other countries were dismissed as "trifles" compared with the sophistication of a country that called itself the "Middle Kingdom", or the centre of the world. Would this attitude support sustained exploration of the world?
- 3 Historian T. Furnish from Georgia (USA) points out that Menzies "does not read Chinese and thus *cites no primary sources*—a problem even if one accepts that the records were all destroyed". Professor Furnish accepts that "the most likely candidate for future world domination in 1400 certainly would have been China, with its huge oceangoing ships backed up by a sophisticated, prosperous, and powerful state; however, *that did not come to pass*".
- 4 The "original" map of 1418 claimed by the Chinese lawyer is probably an 18th-century copy. Some academics point to inconsistencies in the map, including the use of language that does not fit the style of Ming China, suggesting that it may be a fake.
- 5 In her history of the Ming voyages, *When China Ruled the Seas*, Louise Levathes wrote in 1994 that "most scholars are generally agreed that there appears to have been at least some Asian influence in the New World before the arrival of Columbus". However, she does not mention anything about the Ming fleets going around the Cape of Good Hope or circling the globe. "The farthest down the African coast any of the Chinese fleets are certain to have sailed...is near Madagascar."
- 6 Menzies never provides the DNA evidence which he claims shows links between the American Indians and the Chinese. DNA tests in the Atlantic and North American areas have not yet been carried out.
- 7 Other scholars claim that the Newport Tower in fact resembles an ancient Viking (Scandinavian) construction, supporting their thesis that the Vikings discovered America before Columbus. After a careful

study of the artefacts found near or under the tower, including pottery, iron nails, clay tobacco pipes, and buttons, it was found that all these items could be traced to Scotland, England, or the English colonies in America and they were made between the 17th and 19th centuries. The carbon dating of the mortar used to build the tower gives its year of construction as 1665. It would seem that this evidence does not support the case for either Chinese or Viking discovery of America before Columbus!

#### Discussion questions and reflective writing on 1421: The Year China Discovered America

- 1 Which of the evidence that was provided to support the author's claim that the Chinese discovered America before Columbus did you find the most convincing? Explain why you agree with that evidence in two or three sentences.
- 2 Which of the evidence that was provided against the author's claim did you find the most convincing? Explain why you agree with that evidence in two or three sentences.
- 3 After looking at the evidence for both sides, which one do you agree with more? Explain

your answer in three or four sentences, referring to specific evidence to support your reasoning.

- 4 What does this debate about the discovery of America tell us about the study of history? (Remember, the word "history" comes from the Greek "istoria", meaning questioning or inquiry.) Is the question of the "discovery" of America an important one? Explain in three or four sentences.
- 5 If Menzies' claim is fully verified, how would that change our understanding of world history in the last 600 years? Explain in three or four sentences.
- 6 Zheng He's voyages are being used by the Chinese government today for political and diplomatic purposes, to back its claim that China's rising power will not threaten its neighbours. Why is history used by people in the present to support their viewpoints? Do you think this is a legitimate use of history?
- 7 The Ming emperors had a vision of a world brought together in spiritual unity through trade and diplomacy. Do you think this is an appropriate vision for our global community today? Are there alternative models of globalization you would suggest?

## Areas of knowledge

Pause as we leave history as an area of knowledge to look back over all of mathematics, the natural sciences, human sciences, and history. Cast your mind ahead toward the arts and ethics, which we will treat next. With all areas of knowledge in mind, consider the knowledge issues that arise first from reflections on a rainbow and then from the tiny story of the ichthyologist.

### The rainbow

contributed by Charles Freeman

Read the quotations on the following pages and then consider in class discussion the questions that follow them. Rainbows can invoke, beautifully, nearly the whole of knowledge.